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Commentary on Maceio Ilon Lauer's "Categorizing Visual Argumentation Processes: Visual commonplaces in civic culture"

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1. INTRODUCTION

This is an important paper that pushes the discussion of visual argumentation in a useful direction. In my commentary, I want to identify some of the key theses Lauer advocates, suggest one additional concept that might fruitfully be added to his theoretical perspective, and ask a question about the details of his analysis. Above all else, I want to encourage him to continue to develop the themes he has identified in his study of visual argument.

2. LAUER'S HYPOTHESES

Lauer's discussion of visual argument is a rich one. In it, one finds an impressive number of theses that warrant further discussion and debate. Though I cannot pursue this discussion in any comprehensive way here, I think it may be helpful to isolate and identify some of the paper's different theses. The following is a list of some of the key theses that are to my mind worthy of discussion.

1. Just as the syntax of a sentence is broadly oriented around subjects, verbs and objects, images typically position and emphasize subjects, objects, and verbs.
2. A theory of visual argument should address the "semantics," "syntax," and "pragmatics" of visual arguments: roughly speaking, their meaning, form and use.
3. To advance, the theory of visual argument needs to be focus on more extensive, systematic studies of visual argumentative form.
4. Though one must be wary of the attempt to reduce visual arguments to purely verbal forms, a consideration of linguistic grammatical forms can help us construct a better account of visual syntax.

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5. Manipulated photographs of the sort that Lauer discusses are increasingly understood, not as simple forgeries, but as standpoints, propositions, assumptions and arguments in a way that makes it less important whether they are, in some literal sense, “false images”.

6. The John Kerry images Lauer discusses—and other images that might be compared—can be analyzed by applying rhetorical figures that operate in a manner roughly analogous to the way they operate in verbal contexts.

I think that every one of these theses makes an important point that merits more investigation. A fuller discussion of each thesis could be the basis of a substantial contribution to the theory of visual argument. It lies beyond the scope of the present commentary, where I cannot give any of Lauer’s theses the attention they deserve, but I will make some specific comments which will, I hope, push the discussion in the right direction.

3. THE ROLE OF GENRE IN VISUAL ARGUMENTATION

I want to begin with a friendly suggestion about the analysis of photographic images that Lauer proposes. Much of what he says about their meaning and use seems to me correct and poignant, but needs to be circumscribed as an account of a particular genre of visual argument. I want to emphasize this point because there is, even if one accepts Lauer’s commitment to visual syntax, semantics and pragmatics, little reason to believe that all visual genres will be circumscribed by the *same* syntax, semantics and pragmatics.

In a court room or scientific investigation in which visual images are presented as documentary evidence, an image of a donkey with the head of a man or woman makes no sense. It is not ‘well formed,’ even if it is the result of a very clever photoshop manipulation. In sharp contrast, the same image in a political cartoon makes perfect sense—we immediately understand it as the claim that the person being caricatured is a democrat. To explain this difference, I think we need to distinguish two different visual genres, and recognize that a well formed image is defined differently for each.

In part, I want to focus on this aspect of Lauer’s account because I think that his remarks about photographic images nicely illustrate some of the issues that the notion of genre raises in a visual and a verbal context. It would, I think, be difficult to argue that the manipulation of photographic images he discusses can always be understood in the open ended manner he suggests as the new norm. Within the history of photography we can identify a genre of documentary photography which presents an image as, above all else, an accurate and correct depiction of some state of affairs. Photographic evidence used in a court often functions as testimony that proves that “This is what happened.” I think that the Wright photograph Lauer begins with belongs within this genre. In a case such as this, a photograph purports to have veracity in a literal sense. If it fails in this respect, it is, in a full sense, undermined, falsified, discredited.

It does not follow that Lauer is mistaken in his account of manipulated images. Rather, it suggests that there are (at least) two genres of photographic images we should distinguish: one which presents a photograph as a literal presentation of reality, and another in which this aspect of replication is less important. I agree with Lauer’s

suggestion that the increasing ease with which photographs can be manipulated has pushed us in a direction in which the second genre is increasingly significant.

The evolution of visual genres this implies should not surprise us. If detailed studies of literary genres show us anything, it is that the distinctions between genres are often vague and blurred, and that one genre frequently gives birth to another. One sees this in ancient literature, where it is arguable that history of the sort one finds in Herodotus begins as a collection of anecdotes, which spawns the kind of biography one finds in Diogenes Laertius, which spawns early ancient novels like Apuleius' *Golden Ass*.

In analyzing and assessing photographic images, and visual images more broadly, the important point is that we probably need to understand the different genres of photographic images differently, in a manner that is sensitive to *their own* semantics, syntax and pragmatics.

4. HANOI JOHN

I want to turn from the notion of genre to Lauer's discussion of the images of John Kerry and Jane Fonda he discusses. I agree with his analysis of the meaning of these images, and their general argumentative function. The use of rhetorical figures to explain their syntax is an intriguing method of analysis.

In passing I will say that the analysis of the last image as a visual timesis is particularly intriguing, though I wonder if the content should be summarized differently. The image is not John Kerry and Jane Fonda with agitation inserted between them but an overarching image of "demonstration" with Kerry and Fonda inserted in the middle of it. This makes one wonder whether the right verbal analogue might not be "demon-John and Jane-strating." I think it is a bonus that the derivative "demon" in this construction nicely captures the pejorative aspect of the visual proposition.

That said, I want to ask a more basic question about Lauer's analysis. When I look at these images from the point of view of argument, I see them as striking examples of arguments "by association." Clearly, the intent is to associate Kerry with Fonda. In the second case I see *two* association arguments, as the two of them are associated with the agitating demonstrators that are arranged around them.

Looked at from this point of view, I wonder why we shouldn't analyze and assess these images as "Guilt by Association" arguments. This approach usefully elaborates their meaning in terms of a well recognized scheme of argument. It makes the visual syntax and semantics relatively straightforward. The images place two people together in a natural grouping. In doing so they tell us that the two of them are associated, and this leads to the conclusions Lauer so well enumerates. The question I want to raise is whether the application of rhetorical figures is needed in this analysis. Why wouldn't this much simpler, guilt by association, analysis not a better way to understand the dynamics of the visual arguments?

5. CONCLUSION

I have only scratched the surface of Lauer's analysis. This is unfortunate given that it raises so many fertile questions that deserve discussion. I will end by reiterating the most

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important point: that we could learn a great deal from an in depth, systematic discussion of visual syntax, semantics and pragmatics.

[Link to paper](#)